

IF WE CONSIDER THE LEARNING PROCESS AS AN ASSEMBLY LINE...

We find that often our first reaction is to say that the assembly line is broken in high school – after all, that’s where dropouts occur.

But, although high school is where the dramatic evidence of the failed system is recognized, that is not when the break occurs, and therefore, that is not the point at which it can be fixed. By then, it’s too late!

As we look at the assembly line more closely, we realize the following:

- If a child does not read with a reasonable degree of comprehension at the end of the third grade, the likelihood of that child becoming a dropout is over 90%.
- Sadly, that early on the assembly line, we know who is destined to be in the failed one third. Simply put, if a child cannot read, she/he cannot learn.
- If we move even further toward the beginning of the assembly line, we find that children unprepared for kindergarten often don’t achieve reading comprehension by the third grade and are destined for dropout status.

For these children... kindergarten is too late!

We know, thanks to countless scientific studies, that from birth to age four – and particularly in the first 18 months – children rapidly develop the critical capabilities which become the foundation for their subsequent development.

In fact, 90% of the architectural structure of the brain is built in the first three years of life. Children are born with a billion brain cells, and no more are created after birth. However, the way these cells are “wired” or linked together, is controlled by the environment the infant experiences during these first three years.

With proper stimulation and learning opportunities, the gains children can make in language and thinking skills, and in the growth of their emotional, social, behavioral, and moral capacities are remarkable. But without such brain development, scientists tell us that they will miss a “window of opportunity” that closes forever as they leave those early years.

There is nothing more stifling than a compromised beginning.

There is nothing sadder than a missed opportunity.

There is nothing more tragic than a child whose possibilities are unnecessarily diminished.

But, we have the knowledge and capacity to fix our educational assembly line, preparing every child for success in our public education system.

EXAMPLE:

Young Japanese children have no difficulty incorporating the “L” sound into their vocabulary if they learn it early enough. However, after six years of age, in almost every case, if they’ve not acquired the skill, they can never again pronounce English words that begin with the letter “L.” The window of opportunity in which they had to learn to make that sound, has closed.



STRENGTH AS A COMMUNITY LEADER AND PARTNER

The Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee exists to connect generosity with need, providing philanthropic services which enhance the 43 counties we serve. As a leader, convener, catalyst and resource, we provide ways for civic-minded individuals, families and companies to contribute to the community.

From our beginning in 1991, we have helped donors and nonprofit organizations realize their charitable intentions and make an impact in our community. The Foundation is made up of more than 670 charitable funds established by individuals, families, businesses, and nonprofit organizations.

The Foundation serves four important constituencies: givers, helping them meet their charitable objectives; nonprofit organizations, providing support for their services and programs; professional advisors, facilitating charitable gifts and helping their clients achieve philanthropic goals; and the community-at-large, addressing unmet community needs.

The Foundation is a vehicle through which people of various backgrounds and means can make gifts and bequests to benefit their community. The Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee is both flexible and permanent in nature, assuring donors that the spirit of their gifts will endure.

We do more than just hope for a better future. We work with you to make it happen.

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THE WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIP INITIATIVE

OF THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF MIDDLE TENNESSEE



The Early Childhood Education Scholarship Initiative seeks to transform the lives of children who risk entering the public school system at an educational and behavioral deficit that will forever hamper their ability to learn and to succeed in school and in life. Our goal is to make a difference in the lives of 100 children by capitalizing upon the “Window of Opportunity.”

“The development of the unique features of speech and fine motor function occurs almost exclusively during the period from birth until three years of age as a result of the abundance of neurons (brain cells) that exist at this pivotal time; accordingly, to maximize learning opportunities, it is imperative that all children receive the highest level of attention during this narrow and irreplaceable ‘Window of Opportunity.’”

– Dr. Henry Foster  
Professor Emeritus and former Dean  
School of Medicine, Meharry Medical College  
And Clinical Professor, Obstetrics and Gynecology Vanderbilt University

OUR COMMUNITY’S CHALLENGE

Every year too many of our children show up on the doorsteps of our schools ill-equipped to learn, unable to succeed. Why? Often, until that moment, learning and “playing well with others” have not been a priority in their lives. Sometimes they’ve never seen a book; sometimes their days have been filled with TV rather than human interaction.

As a result, our children and our schools are suffering.

THE SITUATION IS DIRE

- Almost one-third of our young people do not graduate from high school.
- Dropouts are at risk for higher rates of incarceration, unemployment, and physical and mental health problems.
- We are investing most of our resources too late, decreasing the chances of success.



A NEW MINDSET

We have the knowledge and the ability to prepare every child in our community for success in school and in life. We know every child has the capacity to succeed, that’s the good news. But to address this crisis, we need to step outside the traditional definition of public schools and public education. This is a different ballgame. We have no “tried and true” mechanism to take the actions we know we need to take.

To save these children, we need a new mindset.

We must start by accepting responsibility for funding quality early childhood education for children who are at risk. We have to acknowledge that there is no silver bullet, no easy fix. We must also acknowledge that our solution will be both expensive and a long-time coming.

*This isn’t someone else’s problem, it is one we must all own. But at least we know where we must begin.*

- Without this new mindset:
- We can not break the cycle of poverty
  - We can not solve our drug problems
  - We can not solve our incarceration problems
  - We can not solve many of our health care cost problems
  - We can not create an economic climate that we all desire
  - We can not attain an acceptable K-12 public education system in our community

THESE CHILDREN ARE OUR FUTURE

The future of any society depends on its ability to foster the health and well being of the next generation. Today’s children will become tomorrow’s citizens, tax-payers and parents. For our future, we need to focus on our greatest asset – our children. **We must:**

- Create opportunities to enhance educational outcomes, particularly for children who are most at risk because, simply put, education is the key factor for success in breaking the cycle of poverty.
- Create success by making sure that every child is prepared to be educated.
- Create a foundation for all future learning, behavior and health.

When we fail to provide children what they need to build a strong foundation for healthy and productive lives, we put our future prosperity and security at risk. It is a progression of events that can only improve by changing what happens in the beginning of a child’s learning experience.



WHAT WE PROPOSE:  
AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

Despite studies by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis\* and others over the past few years, Early Childhood Education Scholarships are pretty rare. But to address our challenge, The Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee is beginning such a program – partnering with Early Childhood Education centers which have achieved Three-Star Certification from the State. These centers have a proven track-record of successful learning programs and strong parental involvement.

Our goal is to provide quality educational settings to children from birth until they are old enough to enter the Governor’s Pre-K program.

We are relying upon these centers to help us identify at-risk children who, but for this assistance, would be unable to access this care. The majority of children we are helping are children of the “working poor,” a designation bestowed upon families earning between \$18,000 and \$24,000 annually. These are families who earn too much to receive financial assistance from the State, but for whom quality care would be nearly impossible to afford.

We will also assist families where without this help, a parent would have to leave school or quit work to keep their child safe and secure. This is a key factor in reducing the cycle of poverty.

We hear – loud and clear – from the experts in brain development that the initial four years are critical to a child’s success. Therefore, it is our pledge to every child receiving a scholarship that we will see them through until they reach the Governor’s Pre-K program at four years old. We make that commitment because continuity is critical; we don’t want to pull the rug out from under them.

We provide the majority of the funding in the form of a scholarship. The family and the center work to cover the remaining costs. The children reap the benefit of caring, professional teachers who regularly assess their progress and ensure they meet the appropriate developmental benchmarks. The center’s staff also works with parents to provide them with the tools to parent well.

The continuity of high quality early childhood education for these children will be an investment that yields untold rewards. This may be the single most cost-effective investment we can make in our future. We hope you will help make this happen.

- As a society and as a community we must acknowledge the need for all children to receive the best possible early childhood education experiences. With your help:
- We CAN break the cycle of poverty
  - We CAN dramatically reduce our drug problems
  - We CAN mitigate our incarceration problems
  - We CAN solve many of our health care cost problems
  - We CAN create an economic climate that we all desire
  - We CAN attain an acceptable public education system in our community

\* [www.minneapolisfed.org/pubs/fedgaz/03-03/earlychild.cfm](http://www.minneapolisfed.org/pubs/fedgaz/03-03/earlychild.cfm)

